

Birding Dja Biosphere Reserve, southern Cameroon

Eddie Williams

Observer les oiseaux dans la Réserve de la Biosphère du Dja, au Cameroun du sud. La Réserve de la Biosphère du Dja, une Zone d'Importance pour la Conservation des Oiseaux et un World Heritage Site, n'est généralement pas incluse dans le circuit des ornithologues étrangers visitant le pays. Cette réserve, qui s'étend sur 5.260 km² et est ainsi cinq fois plus grande que le Parc National de Korup, contient pourtant une avifaune riche en espèces intéressantes, telles que le Picatharte du Cameroun *Picathartes oreas* et l'énigmatique Tisserin de Bates *Ploceus batesi*. L'article fournit des informations sur l'accès, les sites clés et les espèces d'oiseaux et de mammifères.

Cameroon is an essential destination for those with an interest in African birds. A well-worn birding route has consequently emerged, encompassing the Sahel in the north, the central savannas, the montane forest of the Bamenda highlands, Mt Kupe, Mt Cameroon and the lowland forests of Korup in the south-west (see, e.g., Mills & Cohen 2003, 2004). One major habitat zone generally absent from most birders' itineraries is the vast lowland rainforests of the south and south-east. Though much of the region is being logged and degraded, a network of reserves and national parks has been established to protect huge areas of forest. One such is Dja Biosphere Reserve, an Important Bird Area (IBA) and World Heritage Site, which at 5,260 km² is five times larger than Korup National Park and is thus the largest protected area in Cameroon (Fotso *et al.* 2001).

Situated south-east of the capital Yaoundé and just south of the village of Somalomo, the reserve can be accessed from the latter. It is very rich in mammals and birds typical of the Congolese-type lowland evergreen and semi-evergreen rainforest. For birders, it is especially interesting in that the world's largest known Grey-necked Picathartes *Picathartes oreas* colony occurs, making sightings of this enigmatic species virtually guaranteed. In addition, there is the possibility of finding the elusive and almost unknown in life Bates's Weaver *Ploceus batesi*. Other sought-after species previous-

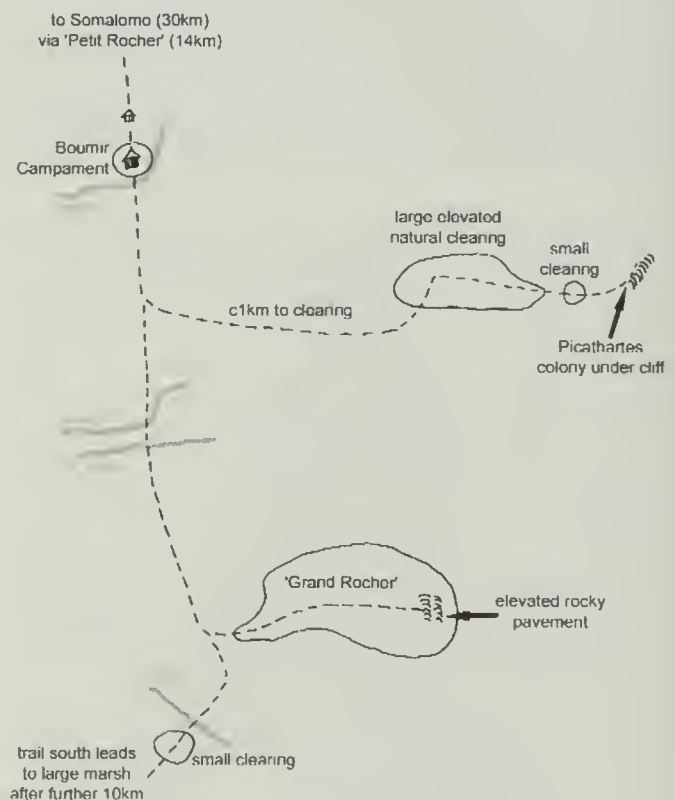


Figure 1. Location of Dja Biosphere Reserve (left) and sites within the reserve mentioned in the text (right).

Localisation de la Réserve de la Biosphère du Dja (à gauche) et des sites à l'intérieur de la réserve mentionnés dans le texte (à droite).

ly recorded include Congo Serpent Eagle *Dryotriorchis spectabilis*, Plumed Guinea fowl *Guttera plumifera*, Grey-throated Rail *Canirallus oculus*, Akun Eagle Owl *Bubo leucostictus*, Tessmann's Flycatcher *Muscicapa tessmanni* and Yellow-capped Weaver *Ploceus dorsomaculatus* (Fotso *et al.* 2001), and there is even an outside chance of Shelley's Eagle Owl *Bubo shelleyi*.

I found the protection and management of the park, currently undertaken by the European Union-funded ECOFAC project, however, to be woefully inefficient. Poaching was rampant and I saw animals being conveyed across the River Dja at Somalomo in front of park staff, who had not been paid for six months. Visitors are extremely rare and the primary aim of this article is to encourage birders to visit and thus promote the effective conservation of the reserve's wildlife. For the time being, at least, it is possible to observe impressive numbers of rainforest mammals, but the long-term outlook appears bleak unless serious efforts are made to reduce poaching and improve park management.

I visited Dja in March 2006 during a birding trip to Cameroon. I had no prior information on how to visit, apart from that provided in budget travel guides, which was for the most part inaccurate. Although the reserve is remote, a major expedition is not necessary and it can be visited by lone birders such as myself with a little preparation and planning, and surprisingly cheaply. It did take me some time to obtain the permit and make the necessary travel arrangements in Yaoundé, however, and I firstly cover these details.

Permits

Access is not possible without a permit issued by the ECOFAC conservateur in Yaoundé, currently Mr Nlegue Etienne Hyacinthe (e-mail henlegue@yahoo.fr). Note that the ECOFAC cannet e-mail address is no longer used. The postal address is B.P. 13844, Yaoundé, and the telephone number 221-4273. I was unable to obtain these details prior to my visit and made my arrangements after a long search for the ECOFAC office in Yaoundé. The office is best located from the Hotel Sipowa, situated c.500 m north-west of Carrefour Bastos along the main road which runs from this crossroads to (after 3.5 km) Mt Fébé. From the Hotel Sipowa, walk back towards central Yaoundé on the right-hand side of the road. After

less than 1 km you will see a long, low wall with 'African Security-Cameroon' painted on it in large letters. The ECOFAC office is just beyond this in what looks like a small apartment block on the right, with a security hut in the driveway. The guard will direct you to the office. The permit costs CFA 5,000 per person per day or part day (UK£1 = CFA 974, in August 2006). You will also be given a letter to present to the Police Chief at Somalomo, who will register your details. ECOFAC staff at Somalomo will also need to see the permit. There is no requirement to take an 'eco-guard' with you, as they may suggest.

Whilst killing time in Yaoundé, the slopes of nearby Mt Fébé are well worth a visit. A total of 163 bird species has been recorded around the exercise circuit on the lower slopes alone (Quantrill & Quantrill 1998). I saw **Brown-backed Scrub Robin** *Cercotrichas hartlaubi* and **Yellow-necked Greenbul** *Chlorocichla falkensteini* is common.

Travel

The best route is probably Yaoundé–Akonolinga–Messaména–Somalomo. The latter is situated on the north bank of the River Dja at the reserve boundary. If using your own or a hired vehicle ensure it has four-wheel drive, as the road between Messaména and Somalomo can be difficult, especially after rain. Buses leave Yaoundé for Somalomo every Wednesday and Saturday at 08.00 hrs from the 'Fanta Citroen' taxi park in the Mvog Ada quarter; taxi drivers all know it. It is not really a taxi park, more of a parking place adjacent to a bar. Buy a ticket (CFA 4,000) the day before, if possible. The journey takes all day, with the bus usually arriving in Somalomo in the evening, allowing sufficient time to arrange a guide and supplies. Breakdowns can occur, however, and I didn't arrive until 04.30 hrs the following morning. Buses return to Yaoundé on Thursdays and Sundays at 07.00 hrs.

Other logistics

The guide I used was Jackson Abete Djengo, Président des Guides, ECOFAC, Somalomo, known locally as Djengo. He is extremely knowledgeable about the mammals and is used by the park surveys. He speaks a little English, unlike most locals. I would recommend you find him immediately on arrival at Somalomo, although he



may well find you. A guide is essential in Dja as some mammal trails can resemble human trails to the layman and there is potential to get hopelessly lost. Jackson will help with supplies and secure porters if you intend to base yourself at Boumir, 30 km inside the park. Guides cost CFA 3,500 and porters CFA 3,000 per day. It is only worth hiring porters for the walk to and from Boumir. All food can be bought at Somalomo. You will need a tent at Boumir and a good water filter is also useful, unless you wish to carry all water with you, or boil it.

There is a basic hostel at Somalomo known as 'Antoinette's' which has several rooms at CFA 4,000 per night. The hostess will provide food if required (breakfast CFA 3,000; lunch and supper CFA 6,000), but there are several basic cafés in the village which provide much cheaper food for those on a shoestring. Much of the food supplied, however, is bush meat and I would strongly advise against financing this trade by buying it.

The 30-km walk to Boumir can be made in a day. However, those wishing to break the journey part way can camp at a small stream near an inselberg known as 'Petit Rocher'.

Birds and birding sites

The park's avifauna is typical of the Congolese-type lowland rainforest and thus includes a number of species not usually encountered by birders visiting Cameroon. I found several areas of the tiny portion of the park I explored to be especially productive.

Captions to photos on opposite page

Figure 2. Grey-necked Picathartes / Picatharte du Cameroun *Picathartes oreas* (Doug Peters/Earthwatch)

Figure 3. Congo Serpent Eagle / Serpenteaire du Congo *Dryotriorchis spectabilis* (Callan Cohen)

Figure 4. Forest Elephant / Éléphant de forêt *Loxodonta africana cyclotis* (Leonard Usongo)

Figure 5. Chocolate-backed Kingfisher / Martin-chasseur marron *Halycon badia* (Pete Morris/Birdquest)

Figure 6. Hartlaub's Duck / Canard de Hartlaub *Pteronetta hartlaubii* (Pete Morris/Birdquest)

Figure 7. African Piculet / Picumne de Verreaux *Sasia africana* (Bernard Van Elegem)

Somalomo area

The River Dja at Somalomo is bordered by riverine forest which held Gosling's Apalis *Apalis goslingi*, White-browed Forest Flycatcher *Fraseria cinerascens* and Cassin's Flycatcher *Muscicapa cassini*. White-throated Blue Swallow *Hirundo nigrita* was common and extremely confiding around the crossing point. It would be worth hiring a dugout to explore the river further. Spot-breasted Ibis *Bostrychia rara* and Vermiculated Fishing Owl *Scotopelia bouvieri*, both of which occur in the park, are possibilities.

Once across the river and in the park a broad track runs alongside its northern boundary, connecting a number of hunter and pygmy villages. This passes through areas of farmbush, secondary and primary forest, and is good for forest edge and farmbush species. I only spent a lunchtime and an early evening in this area en route and wish I'd had more time. Afep *Columba unicincta* and Western Bronze-naped Pigeons *C. iriditorques*, Black-collared Lovebird *Agapornis swindernianus*, Black Bee-eater *Merops gularis*, Spotted Honeyguide *Indicator maculatus* and good numbers of Splendid *Lamprotornis splendidus*, Purple-headed *L. purpureiceps* and Narrow-tailed Starlings *Poeoptera lugubris* frequented the treetops, along with a singing Zenker's Honeyguide *Melignomon zenkeri*. Sooty Boubou *Laniarius leucorhynchus* and Yellow-throated Nicator *Nicator vireo* skulked in the undergrowth alongside the track and I had tantalising flight views of a small all-dark nightjar at dusk. After c.6 km an inconspicuous track leads off to the right and reaches Petit Rocher after a further 10 km.

Petit Rocher

The track to Petit Rocher and Boumir passes through dense primary forest. It can be difficult to follow and is in parts heavily overgrown, requiring some machete work by the guide. This obviously reduces the amount of birding time en route. I observed Latham's Forest Francolin *Francolinus lathamii* and Blue-headed Wood Dove *Turtur brehmeri* on the trail, together with a poorly seen covey of guineafowl which were probably Plumed. As I set out late from Somalomo, I had to camp at Petit Rocher. This is the first of the rock- and grass-covered inselbergs which become more frequent and extensive toward the centre of the park. I observed an extremely confiding White-spotted

Flufftail *Sarothrura pulchra* here and an African Wood Owl *Strix woodfordii* put in an appearance after dark. From Petit Rocher it is a further 14 km or so to Boumir. I frequently encountered mixed-species flocks along this and other trails in the park. Greenbuls were always a feature and included Red-tailed *Criniger calurus*, White-bearded *C. ndussumensis* and Eastern Bearded *C. chloronotus*, Icterine *Phyllastrephus icterinus* and Xavier's *P. xavieri*, and Little Grey *Andropadus gracilis*, Ansorge's *A. ansorgei* and Cameroon Sombre *A. curvirostris*, providing endless identification challenges. Ant swarms were also regular and often attended by Red-tailed *Neocossyphus rufus* and White-tailed Ant Thrushes *N. poensis*, Brown-chested *Alethe poliocephala* and Fire-crested *Alethes A. diademata*, and Red-tailed *Bleda syndactylus* and Lesser Bristlebills *B. notatus*. Lowland Akalat *Sheppardia cyornithopsis* also occurs, though I only heard it.

Boumir

Boumir was used c.10 years ago during the initial scientific surveys of the area but is now nothing more than a dilapidated wooden shelter. It is situated in a small clearing beside a stream, providing a convenient water source. Early mornings in this area were often very productive. Gabon Coucal *Centropus anselli* was especially regular here, though they could be extremely hard to see. Great Blue Turaco *Corythaeola cristata*, Yellow-billed Turaco *Tauraco macrorhynchus* and Olive Long-tailed Cuckoo *Cercococcyx olivinus* were common visitors to the treetops, and a Long-tailed Hawk *Urotriorchis macrourus* once surveyed the clearing for ten minutes. Blue-billed *Malimbus nitens* and Cassin's Malimbos *M. cassini* were often present in *Raphia* palms bordering the stream. Other interesting species around the clearing included White-crested Hornbill *Tropicranus albocristatus*, Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill *Tockus camurus*, Cassin's *Neafrapus cassini* and Sabine's Spinetails *Rhaphidura sabini*, and Olivaceous Flycatcher *Muscicapa olivascens*. At night, African Wood Owl, Sjöstedt's Owlet *Glaucidium sjostedti* and Nkulengu Rail *Himantornis haematopus* added to the chorus of genets and Tree Hyraxes *Dendrohyrax dorsalis*. On one occasion I heard calls matching those of Shelley's Eagle Owl on the Chappuis (2000) CDs, but their owner could not be coaxed into view.

The trail to the south continues beyond Boumir, forking after a few hundred metres. After c.1 km the trail to the left reaches a large inselberg and from there to a picathartes colony. The trail to the right traverses two streams before, again after c.1 km, leading to the 'Grand Rocher', the largest inselberg in the area. I found the first of the two streams along this path to be productive. Many birds came to drink and a number of quiet vigils yielded good views of White-bellied Kingfisher *Alcedo leucogaster*, Blue-headed Bee-eater *Merops muelleri*, Black-capped *Illadopsis cleaveri* and Brown *Illadopsis I. fulvescens*, and Dusky Crested Flycatcher *Elminia nigromitrata*. I also had sightings of Congo Serpent Eagle and Dusky Long-tailed Cuckoo *Cercococcyx mechowi*, the latter coming in very close to my whistled imitation of its 'long-call'. Chocolate-backed Kingfishers *Halcyon badia* were frequent but extremely hard to see in the canopy.

Picathartes colony

The path to the colony first crosses an extensive grass- and rock-covered inselberg with an avifauna very distinct from the surrounding forest. Long-legged Pipit *Anthus pallidiventris* and Chattering Cisticola *Cisticola anonymus* were abundant and Freckled Nightjar *Caprimulgus tristigma* roosted on areas of rock pavement. I was surprised to see a single Purple Glossy Starling *Lamprolornis purpureus* here, presumably a wanderer from the savannas. Other oddities included a juvenile Rock Pratincole *Glareola nuchalis*, miles from water, and a Woolly-necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus*. Another singing Zenker's Honeyguide was at the forest edge. Also interesting was a regular north-bound passage of small groups of European Bee-eaters *Merops apiaster*, totalling c.60 birds, over the inselbergs. This species reputedly avoids the rain-forest zones (Borrow & Demey 2001).

From the inselberg, the trail re-enters forest before descending rapidly to the base of a long cliff face on which I counted c.100 picathartes nests. The best time to visit is at dawn (requiring a 05.30 hrs start from Boumir), when many rockfowl attend the colony. At this time you can be literally surrounded by them, providing an unforgettable experience. I saw at least seven in 30 minutes, some at very close range, and heard c.12 others, whilst displaying Rufous-sided Broadbills *Smithornis rufolateralis* provided a diverting

sideshow. I also observed a **Yellow-throated Cuckoo** *Chrysococcyx flavigularis* there. Jackson informed me that the rockfowl are unaccountably absent from the colony during August.

There is a small marsh c.1 km south of the colony where I heard **Dja River Warbler** singing. Unfortunately access to the open areas is very difficult here as elephants have turned the approach into a muddy morass.

Grand Rocher

The right-hand trail from Boumir leads to the 'Grand Rocher', splitting again here, the left fork going to the inselberg with the trail to the right continuing south. The area of forest at the point just before the trail leads onto the inselberg regularly contained mixed-species flocks that often appeared almost static. **Malimbe** flocks were a feature with **Cassin's**, **Crested M.** *malimbicus* and **Red-crowned M.** *coronatus* all regular. It would be worth searching these thoroughly for **Bates's Weaver**, which I did not find. Other birds included **Buff-spotted** *Campethera nivosa* and **Brown-eared Woodpeckers** *C. caroli*, **Chestnut-capped** *Erythrocercus mccallii*, **Fraser's Forest** *Fraseria ocreata* and **Shrike Flycatchers** *Megabyas flammulatus*, and **Blue Cuckoo-shrike** *Coracina azurea*.

'Grand Rocher' is the largest inselberg in the Boumir area, with an almost prairie-like habitat. An elevated rocky pavement provides an ideal viewing platform across the grassland and the surrounding forest canopy. The extent of the forest can be appreciated here, with an endless carpet of green visible in all directions. Flights of **Black-casqued Hornbills** *Ceratogymna atrata* and **Grey Parrots** *Psittacus erithacus* passed overhead and numbers of spinetails were often also present, once including two **Black Spinetails** *Telacanthura melanopygia*. **Crowned Eagle** *Stephanoaetus coronatus* could often be seen over the canopy. I flushed a ground-roosting **Bates's Nightjar** *Caprimulgus batesi* at the forest edge; the bird landed in a nearby tree, providing excellent views. Mixed sunbird flocks, comprising **Johanna's** *Cinnyris johannae*, **Green-throated** *Chalcomitra rubescens*, **Little Green** *Anthreptes seimundi* and **Tiny Sunbirds** *Cinnyris minullus*, were present in flowering trees bordering the clearing, and prominent snags were occupied by vigilant **Blue-throated Rollers** *Eurystomus gularis*.

According to Jackson, the trail to the south leads a further 10 km to an extensive marsh where large numbers of elephants congregate. This could well be worth a visit for those with sufficient time and energy.

Mammals

Due to poaching pressure many mammals, especially the larger species, such as **Western Lowland Gorilla** *Gorilla gorilla gorilla*, **African Forest Elephant** *Loxodonta cyclotis*, **Forest Buffalo** *Syncerus caffer nanus* and **Leopard** *Panthera pardus*, have moved to the interior of the park. Those searching for mammals should therefore concentrate on the Boumir area. Jackson informed me that the presence of visitors at Boumir also discourages poachers, which in turn encourages mammals to concentrate there. I saw far greater numbers of forest mammals here than in any other area of forest in Cameroon, including Korup. Especially impressive were the numbers and variety of primates. I recorded both **Lowland Gorilla** and **Chimpanzee** *Pan troglodytes* in the area of the picathartes colony. Good numbers of **Guereza** *Colobus guereza*, **Putty-nosed Monkey** *Cercopithecus nictitans nictitans*, **Moustached Guenon** *C. cephus*, **Grey-cheeked Mangabey** *Lophocebus albigena* and **Crowned Monkey** *Cercopithecus pogonias* were also evident around Boumir. Inselbergs, such as 'Grand Rocher', provide excellent platforms for viewing primates. At dusk it is worthwhile spending some time on 'Grand Rocher', as **Forest Buffalo** leave the surrounding forest to feed on the open grassland. I had excellent views of a family of five at a range of c.50 m. The nocturnal **Bay Duiker** *Cephalophus dorsalis* also frequents forest edge alongside the inselbergs, where they can occasionally be seen by torchlight. The diurnal **Blue Duiker** *C. monticola* is the commonest duiker and is frequently found lying up after dark. I also saw **Peter's Duiker** *C. callipygus* once by day and found remains of a **Yellow-backed Duiker** *C. silvicultor* killed by poachers. Signs of elephants were everywhere, but I was not lucky (or unlucky) enough to encounter one. According to Jackson, **Golden Cat** *Felis aurata*, **Water Chevrotain** *Hyemoschus aquaticus* and **Royal Antelope** *Neotragus pygmaeus* all occur in the reserve. He also described **Agile Mangabey** *Cercocebus agilis* and **De Brazza's Monkey** *Cercopithecus neglectus* as being present.



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Captions to photos on opposite page

- Figure 8. Western Bluebill / Sénégal sanguin *Spermophaga haematina* (Pete Morris/Birdquest)
- Figure 9. White-crested Hornbill / Calao à huppe blanche *Tropicranus albocristatus* (Pete Morris/Birdquest)
- Figure 10. Yellow-browed Camaroptera / Camaroptère à sourcils jaunes *Camaroptera superciliaris* (Bernard Van Elegem)
- Figure 11. Red-rumped Tinkerbird / Barbion à croupion rouge *Pogoniulus atroflavus* (Pete Morris/Birdquest)
- Figure 12. Green Hylia / Hylia verte *Hylia prasina* (Bernard Van Elegem)

One noteworthy place to see Chimpanzee is in the riverine forest along the Dja just behind the ECOFAC forest guard buildings in Somalomo. The presence of the guards presumably deters poachers, making it a safe place for them. They visit the canopy just before dusk and can be seen from the track to the river. Northern Talapoin *Miopithecus ogouensis* is also found in this area.

As always in rainforest, birding in Dja can often be slow and good sites are difficult to pinpoint in the vast area covered by the reserve. I hope this article encourages birders to visit and thus contribute to the protection of this fascinating area. There certainly remains much to be discovered and productive sites other than those mentioned above will doubtless be found. For those who enjoy finding their own birds in little-known places Dja reserve is a paradise.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Bill Quantrill, Ron Demey and Richard Webb for encouragement and assistance with the preparation of this article.

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6 Newbold Grove, Croxteth Park, Liverpool L12 0NS, UK. E-mail: Eddieirene@aol.com

Received 17 September 2006; revision accepted 20 October 2006.

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